

On the Ethical Consideration in *Three Lives*

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Abstract: Gertrude Stein is regarded as an avant-garde writer of the 20th century modern literary history, not only because of her innovative writing styles but also because of her aesthetic, philosophical and ethical thoughts beneath the surface of her works. From the narration—"It was a very happy family there all together in the kitchen, the good Anna and Sally and old Baby and young Peter and jolly little Rags", in *Three Lives*, Gertrude Stein combined these factors perfectly. From the equal perspective narration, Stein displays that one human being is as important as another human being, and that animals have the same intrinsic, real dignity and worth as human beings do so that they deserve the same moral consideration as "subject-of-a-life".

Key words: Gertrude Stein *Three Lives* equal perspective narration ethical consideration Inherent Value

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标题:论《三个女人》中的伦理关怀

内容提要:格特鲁德·斯泰因(Gertrude Stein, 1874 - 1946)被誉为20世纪现代主义文学史中的先锋作家。她不仅对传统的写作方式做了大胆的革新,同时还通过这种话语形式的变革,展现出作家作品中所体现的美学、哲学和伦理思想。在小说《三个女人》中,通过对“好安娜”故事里“十分快乐的家庭:好安娜,莎莉,老宝贝儿,小彼得和快活的小淘气”的生动描写,斯泰因将其先锋的写作风格与深刻的精神内涵完美地结合在一起。通过均等视角叙事,作家表达出人与人之间以及人与动物之间亲密的伦理关系,认为人和动物共同具有的天赋价值——即对苦乐的感受能力,应该被视为“具有生命的主体”。

关键词:斯泰因 《三个女人》 均等视角叙事 伦理关怀 天赋价值

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Gertrude Stein is one of the most prolific, important and influential writers of the 20th century. "No matter the debate over her achievement, though, and the prob-

lems or contradictions latent in her approach, there is no doubt that she was a major innovator, one of the leading figures in American literary Modernism" (Gray 432). From the first writing *Things As They Are* (1898) to the "*Reflections on the Atomic Bomb*" (1946), altogether she has written more than 600 works, including novels, autobiographies, poems, essays, operas, whodunits, literary criticism, and the like.

Three Lives was written in 1903, finished in 1906 and finally published at her own expense with the Grafton Press in 1909. Her first published writing is regarded as one of the most important modernist works. "Since Gertrude broke all rules of literary deportment in the very next works to follow, *Three Lives* became, comparatively, the pillar of convention toward which puzzled readers of her later works might turn for some assurance that they were not being confronted by a series of literary hoaxes" (Brinnin 120). Many of Stein's contemporaries understood very well what she was doing, and, as is evident in their critical appraisals of her, they recognized its importance. For example, Edmund Wilson, in *Axel's Castle* (1931), wholeheartedly admires *Three Lives*: "In a style which appears to owe nothing to that of any other novelist, she seems to have caught the very rhythms and accents of the minds of her heroines" (DeKoven, "Introduction" 471). The verbal novelty brought the language back to the average life, and destroyed 19th century syntax and word order.

Three Lives is composed by three stories, "The Good Anna", "Melanctha", and "The Gentle Lena". Instead of white, well-educated, independent-thinking women, the three central characters in *Three Lives* are working-class, the socially marginalized characters, either immigrant or mulatto. Of course, *Three Lives* is not merely an exercise in techniques. There exist the aesthetic and philosophical thoughts beneath the surface of her innovative writing. Starting in the late 1980s, and continuing until the present, "the issues of class, ethnicity, and immigration to America, as well as of race, gender, sexuality, and religion, are raised with increasing emphasis in criticism of *Three Lives*" (DeKoven, *Gertrude Stein* ix).

Among these three stories, the second story "Melanctha," about a young black woman, is considered as the most "experimental" writing, and discussed the most and thoroughly partly because of its stylistic originality and partly because of its unconventional characters and theme. Much of the criticism often addresses the issues on its stylistic originality, such as the extended repetitions, reduced vocabulary and its intense focus on consciousness at the expense of plot. For instance, by the use of repetition as a conscious literary form to express the "continuous present", "a prolonging of the present moment or thought by the device of circling and retracting which repeating is" (Hobhouse 53), Stein denies a concept of time, what she called "the nineteenth-century idea" of a beginning, a middle, and an end. The spiritual quality in her work, the urgency of her pursuit of thought out of time is the vital and exciting element in her writing, which she rightly called "the first definite step away from the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century in literature" (Hobhouse 55). Additionally, its central characters and themes are all associated with Negro life. Richard Wright considered it "one of the most important influences on the beginning of his career" (Brinnin 121). James Weldon Johnson felt in "Melanctha" that Gertrude Stein was "the first... white writer to write a story of love between a Negro

man and woman and deal with them as normal members of the human family” (Brinin 121).

However, many critics think that the first story, “The Good Anna”, seems contain no great novelty. So it is often considered as the most conventional, mainly indebted to the story of Flaubert’s “Un Coeur Simple”. But if it is inquired from the eco-ethical perspective, when the value of dogs becomes quite comparable to that of people in the story, we find that Gertrude Stein goes beyond the Flaubert’s influence. Additionally, just as Cezanne “broke with 19th century classicism to produce paintings in which every square inch of picture mattered as much as any other. The whole field of the canvas is important, rather than the older vision in which central characters dominate, with a sky above and ground below”, Gertrude Stein “in her work with words used the entire text as a field in which every element mattered as much as any other” (Grahm 8). In “The Good Anna”, she “put the Cezanne thing into words”, and “tried to convey the idea of each part of a composition being as important as the whole” (Hass 16), composing a harmonious and integrated episode by describing “a happy family there all together in the kitchen, the good Anna and Sallie and old Baby and young Peter and jolly little Rags” (Stein 222).

The equal perspective narration is the most important way to demonstrate this equal ideal. Just as the Cezanne apple has weight and existence not by its shape or by perspective but by an equilibrium of relationships within the space of the picture, “the happy family”, including Miss Matilda, the good Anna, Sallie, Peter, Rag and Baby, got weight and existence, almost as a physical consistency, from the relationships within the account.

The vivid and effective example is the way that Anna treated Peter (a strayed dog) and Sallie (an under servant) as if she was their “german mother”. Stein wrote, “Sallie was a pretty blonde and smiling german girl, and stupid and a little silly ... Sallie was good, obedient german child. ... Anna was a mother now to Sallie, a good incessant german mother who watched and scolded hard to keep the girl from evil step” (Stein 75). And “Peter was a very useless creature, a foolish, silly, cherished, coward male. ... When he was a little pup he had one night been put into the yard and that was all of his origin she knew. The good Anna loved him well and spoiled him as a good german mother always does her son” (Stein 112). Here, Stein used the words, such as “stupid”, “silly”, “useless”, “foolish”, and “coward”, which are seemingly negative, to show Anna’s deep love to both Sallie and Peter, and her same constant cares and attentions to keep them “from evil step” just as a mother always does her children.

Repetition of words, sentences or even paragraphs is another efficient way. For instance, in the sentence “Now it was not only other girls and the colored man, and dogs, and cats, and horses and her parrot, but her cheery master, jolly Dr. Shonjen, whom she could guide and constantly rebuke to his own good” (Stein 89) or in “So the good Anna gave her all to friends and strangers, to children, dogs and cats, to anything that asked or seemed to need her care” (Stein 110), the words “and” and “to” are used repeatedly many times, seemingly filled with so many grammatical errors, but actually these repetitions endowed “girls”, “the colored man”, “dogs”,

“cats”, “horses”, “her parrot”, “Dr. Shonjen” with Anna’s same considerations.

Sometimes, the repetitions can even function with the structure to interconnect and contrast the story. For example, the sentence “Anna led an arduous and troubled life” is repeated thrice while describing Anna’s occupations with her cares about Peter, Rags, Baby and Sallie. At the very beginning of the story, Stein wrote, “Anna led an arduous and troubled life” (Stein 69) because she had to manage the whole little house for Miss Mathilda. And then because “Periods of evils thinking came very regularly to Peter and to Rags and to the visitors within their gates. At such times Anna would be very busy and scold hard, and then too she always took great care to seclude the bad dogs from each other whenever she had to leave the house. Sometimes just to see how “good” it was that she had made them, Anna would leave the room a little while and leave them all together, and then she would suddenly come back. Back would slink all the wicked-minded dogs at the sound of her hand upon the knob, and then they would sit desolate in their corners like a lot of disappointed children whose stolen sugar has been taken from them (Stein 70), the sentence “You see that Anna led an arduous and troubled life” (Stein 70) is repeated, only adding “You see that”. The sentence “You see that Anna led an arduous and troubled life” is repeated for the third time after telling the story of Anna’s close eye on Sallie because “Sallie’s temptations and transgressions were much like those of naughty Peter and jolly little Rags, and Anna took the same way to keep all three from doing what was bad” (Stein 77). By these repetitions, Stein made an episodic narrative structure to show Anna’s equal cares about Peter, little Rags, old Baby and Sallie’s “chastity and discipline” as the mother often did to their own children.

More innovative theme in “The Good Anna” is that Stein displayed that animals have the same “intrinsic and real and worth” as human beings do.

To Anna, sometimes, Peter, Baby and Rags are even more important. So we find that “[Anna’s] voice was a pleasant one, when she told the histories of bad Peter and of Baby and of little Rags. Her voice was a high and piercing one when she called to the teamsters and to the other wicked men, what she wanted that should come to them, when she saw them beat a horse or kick a dog” (Stein 71).

Anna was a kind-hearted and generous woman. She lived a saved life but gave her all “to friends and strangers, to children, dogs and cats, to anything that asked or seemed to need her care.” To those stray dogs and cats, Anna always took care of them until she found them homes, and “she was always careful to learn whether these people would be good to animals.” Only the young Peter and the jolly little Rags were left because “Anna could not find it in her heart to part with. These became part of the household of the good Anna’s Miss Mathilda” (Stein 111).

Anna had deep affection for the dogs, she often scolded them but tried to guide them for their good. She loved “her good looking coward, foolish young man, Peter” with her strength. For Anna, Peter, just like a little boy, would be timid and he “would retire to his Anna and blot himself out between her skirts” when “the very littlest one there was got inside of the fence and only looked at him”. Peter would also have fears when he “was left downstairs alone, he howled. ‘I am all alone,’ he wailed, and then the good Anna would have to come and fetch him up. Once when

Anna stayed a few nights in a house not far away, she had to carry Peter all the way, for Peter was afraid when he found himself on the street outside his house. Peter was a good sized creature and he sat there and he howled, and the good Anna carried him all the way in her own arms" (Stein 112). Anna spoiled Peter so much that she couldn't stand any blame from others even if Peter did some bad or evil things.

In the second part of the story, the affectionate description of the Baby's death is another vivid example which can show Anna's deep love to old Baby. Baby was the dog of her past life and "she held Anna with old ties of past affection". So Anna's past life seems to come to the end because of Baby's dying. She compared old Baby with old people, and thought that animals would be drearier when they became old and were "cut off from all its world of struggle". She even "wanted a real graveyard for her Baby" and finally "took her old friend done up in decent wrappings and put her into the ground in some quite place that Anna knew of" (Stein 117). To Anna, each member in the "happy family", Peter, Rags, Baby, Sallie, Anna or Miss Mathilda, equally matters and is centered in itself but their relationship is linked together closely since they shared the commonality of "subjects-of-a-life".

We can easily find that, to Stein, animals do have sentience and can experience the feelings of suffering or happy, so they deserve the same moral consideration.

For centuries, the use of animals by human beings—for food, clothing, entertainment, and as research subjects—is morally acceptable. The idea springs mainly from two sources. First, there is the idea of a divine hierarchy based on the theological concept of "dominion", where Adam is given "dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth" (*Holy Bible*, "Genesis 1":26). Second, human beings argue that animals are inferior because they lack rationality or language, and are worthy of less consideration than themselves, or even none.

Although many famous philosophers, such as Aristotle, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Jeremy Bentham, never stopped their questioning on the anthropocentrism and on the benchmark of how we human beings treat other beings, it was not until in the 20th century that the revolutionary ideas about animal rights were raised. In 1975, Peter Singer, the Australian philosopher, first put forward his arguments in favor of animal rights in his *Animal Liberation*, which is now widely regarded as the "bible" of the modern animal rights movement. In his book, Singer rejects the idea that humans or non-humans have natural or moral rights, and proposed instead the equal consideration of interests, arguing that there are no logical, moral, or biological grounds to suppose that a violation of the basic interests of a human being—for example, the interest in not suffering—is different in any morally significant way from a violation of the basic interests of a non-human. The issue of the extent to which animals are sentient is therefore crucial. Another scholar, Tom Regan, held the same views on it. In his book, *The Case for Animals Rights and Empty Cages*, Regan argues that non-human animals are what he calls "subject-of-a-life", and as such are bearers of rights. Animals for Regan have "inherent value" as subject-of-a-life, and cannot be regarded as a means to an end. He believes we ought to treat non-human animals as

we would human beings. Both Singer and Regan extend ethical consideration to the animals, and argue that it is inevitable there is an ethical relation among the human beings as well as between animals and human beings.

Gertrude Stein demonstrated the same idea that commonality between animals and humankind, treating animals as “subject-of-a-life” in her *Three Lives* 70 years before.

To sum up, Gertrude Stein didn't follow any mode or copy any theory to create her writing although she has always been from her babyhood a liberal reader of all English literature. “Suppose it is not that she is veiled and obscure but that we, her readers, are. We are veiled by our judgments. We come to writing prepared to compare it to other writing we have known. Since there is no one to compare her with, this method doesn't work for G. Stein” (Grahm 5). She was not “experimental” in her works, either. Just as her friend Pablo Picasso said, “the artist is never experimental; experimentation is for those who don't know what they are doing” (Grahm 17). She always knew what she was doing as can be seen from her essays and lectures which precisely interpreted her literary theories and intentions. Accordingly, we argue that Gertrude Stein is an avant-garde writer not only because of her innovative writing techniques but also because of her aesthetic, philosophical and ethical thoughts beneath the surface of her works. She has combined these factors perfectly.

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